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ABSTRACT

This paper examines a case study of family play therapy in Israel. The unique contributions of play therapy are evaluated including the therapy's accessibility to young children, its richness and flexibility, its exposure of covert patterns, its wealth of therapeutic means, and its therapeutic economy. The systematization of the therapy attempts to show what the formal and functional properties of make-believe play are, how they can be used in the family play-therapeutic process, and how they can be mobilized to bring about desired change. Properties of make-believe play are: (1) emotionally regulated choice of themes; (2) associative fields and symbolization; (3) differentiation of thematic content from communicative functions; and (4) realification, identification, and playfulness. Principles of realification, identification, and playfulness can have manifold uses in family play therapy in the areas of materialization, owning and alienation, separation of levels, and arbitrariness of signifier. The paper also raises the question of how a therapist can influence the participants in family play therapy to act in ways that let the above-mentioned properties be activated without making participants feel constrained, unnatural or ridiculous. (ABB)

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FAMILY PLAY THERAPY

- Shlomo Ariel -

Some years ago I walked into a Kindergarten in Tel Aviv and asked the teacher whether she would allow me to videotape some pieces of children's play. She was reluctant to let me disturb the peace in her own territory in this manner,but introduced me to a pale,shy boy named Joseph whose mother Ada -so she believed - would not object having me observe and tape him at home in the afternoon.This was the not-very-dramatic beginning of a fascinating adventure,in which I was caught in the midst of a stormy family drama and lived through its symbolic representation in make-believe play. That is where I first witnessed the amazing therapeutic power of joint family make-believe play,and there the seeds of the ideas summarized below had been beginning to form.

The Kindergarten teacher did not know that Joseph's father was about to leave Ada,Joseph's mother,for another woman.Nor did she know that Ada's father had left her mother when Ada was a child.Therefore,neither the teacher nor myself could have anticipated the year of violent, heartbreaking scenes that Joseph and his six-year-old sister Dalia were to be involved in.During this year I would meet Ada and her two children every week for a joint play session,in which I participated as an observer. Already in the first session,it became obvious to me that these playful encounters were to serve not only my own purposes as a researcher,but also the participants' emotional needs.This was to become a solid piece of family play therapy,although no therapist was present.

Never in the course of such a session would any of the participants mention the family crisis openly.Nor would they explicitly discuss their feelings or their personal and interpersonal problems. Whenever Ada

would attempt to raise such an issue,the children would deny the existence of any difficulty or employ diverse evasion tactics.However,everything that was thus denied and suppressed found ample expression through the indirect medium of make-believe.Furthermore,the play seemed to reflect thoughts, feelings and covert transactions which would probably never have emerged to the surface if direct communication were to be used.Finally, a great deal of problem solving was effected solely through the vehicle of play.

In one of the numerous story lines played out in these session Joseph casted himself and his sister in the roles of little prince and princess that were expelled from the palace by their wicked father and mother.This was Joseph's translation of the family strife!For Ada, to play the role that she was obviously asked to assume,that of the wicked queen,was an extremely stressful task.She staged a scene in which she as the queen cried and confessed that she felt bitter because the king her husband did not want her any more and that she was worried because her children misinterpreted her bitterness as a sign that she hated them and ran away.Now she was left alone and lonely.

At this point Joseph and Dalia played as if the little prince and princess,roaming in the wilderness,met a stray horse.Ada was asked to "be" the horse.Then make-believe relationships of mututal support and emotional openness were developed between the children and the horse.

Later,Ada attempted to turn the horse into "the good queen" and invite the little prince and princess back into the palace.At first the children rejected this proposal,but Ada persisted in her attempts to draw them into this game until they complied.

Later I learned that it was not little Joseph that discovered family play therapy.Leading family therapists such as Haley(cf.1975),Madanes(1982), Whitaker(see Keith and Whitaker 1981)and others have incorporated techniques

involving play in their work.However ,having read these important contibutions, I was left with the impression that a new continent was dicovered ,but hardly explored yet.I then decided to set about exploring it.The main questions I asked myself were:(a) What can the unique contributions of family play therapy be? (b)How can family play therapy be systematized?

My present answers are reported elsewhere(see Ariel 1984,Ariel Carel and Tyano 1985).Here some of them are summarized briefly.

The contributions of family play therapy

(1) Accessiblity to young children

In ordinary verbal family therapy young children cannot participate in the process fully,actively and meaningfully.This is due to their cognitive and emotional limitations. These limitations can be detoured however if the child's own natural medium of expression and communication, namely play, is used.This point is taken up again below.

(2) Richness and flexibility

Make-believe play constitutes a singularly rich and flexible medium of expression and communication.It speaks through words,actions,objects and materials.A piece of cloth can become a river and a piéce of wood a whale.The player can be both himself(e.g. an ordinary six year cld boy) and someone or something else(e.g. "a prince", "a horse") at one and the same time.Roles and modes of behavior can be flexibly changed at will, the imagination is freed and a limitless number of events and situations can be made up freely.

(3) Exposure of covert patterns

Since in make -believe play the defenses are laxed and stereotyped patterns of communication loosened,covert and unconscious thoughts,emotions and relationships emerge to the surface.For example,in a family I worked with,the husband's mother,who lived in with the family,used to interfere

with the wife's bringing up of her children.The wife would complain to her husband,but he would always take his mother's side.In a family make-believe game with puppets, the husband directed his rage at a puppet representing "an old woman attacking a young woman", thus revealing his covert feelings toward his mother and his wife.

(4) wealth of therapeutic means

Due to the above-mentioned richness and flexibility of make-believe play, an imaginative therapist who masters the language of play can produce a great variety of family play therapeutic techniques of intervention.He may choose positions such as actor, director or audience.As an actor he can play various roles such as the cunning fox,the submissive rabbit,etc. he may use fancy dresses,objects, spaces and musical instruments.The special properties of make -believe play can be utilized in various manners, some of which are discussed below.

(5)Therapeutic economy

Various properties of make-believe play(see below) render it possible to design interventions(usually non-verbal) that are extremely condensed and highly effective. Their power is partly due to the fact that they "go directly through the right side of the brain"(See Watzlawick 1978) For example,the arbitrary nature of play signifiers(see Piaget 1962) was utilized in the following intervention:A mother who was overinvolved with her twelve year old daughter wanted to send her to a boarding school. The therapist made the daughter sit on her mother's lap.The lap was redefined as a make-believe "boarding school".Thus, the daughter on her mother's lap, the two conducted a make-believe telephone conversation between "daughter in boarding school" and "mother at home".During the conversation, the two expressed the feeling that they missed one another.Following this

intervention the idea of sending the daughter to a boarding school was dropped and the relationships between the two was considerably improved.

Systematization

In the systematization of family play therapy an attempt was made to answer the following three questions:

(1) What are the formal and functional properties of make-beleive play that can be utilized in the family play-therapeutic process?

(2)How can these properties be mobilized to bring about the desired change?

(3)How can the therapist influence the participants to act in ways that let the above-mentioned properties be activated, without making them feel constrained,unnatural or ridiculous?

Here are the answers to the first two questions. As to the third question, the reader is referred to Ariel, Carel and Tyano 1985.

(a) Properties of make-believe play and their therapeutic uses:

(1) Emotionally regulated choice of themes

The choice of themes in a child's make-believe play reflects the child's central emotional concerns(cf. Ariel 1985, Klinger 1971, Piaget 1962,Singer 1973).Through play the child regulates the level of emotional arousal by repeating anxiety laden themes over and over again and by introducing benign, protective or defensive themes when his level of arousal surpasses a certain peak.

This property can be utilized in family therapy in the following ways:

1. Intercommunicating about emotional concerns(as Ada and her children did when they communicated about the theme of abandonment).

2.Providing emotional support between family members(e.g. the threatening "queen" being transformed into a protective "horse" in the play of Ada

and her children).

(2) Associative fields and symbolization

The contents of make-believe play constitute associative fields (see Ariel 1985,Ullmann 1962),that is, certain themes are represented ("symbolized") by other themes,which are associatively linked with the former. For example,in the play of Ada and her children the theme "horse" symbolized (was associated with) the theme "good, frindly mother".

This property can be employed to facilitate the expression and communication of sensitive or difficult feelings and thoughts or illustrate abstract, complex ideas. For example, the theme of "expulsion from the palace" is a symbolic coding of an extremely stressful and complex set of thoughts and experiences.

(3) Differentiating thematic content from communicative functions

In make-believe play there is often a discrepancy between the thematic content and the interpersonal message.For example, when the child says"The prince and princess are roaming in the wilderness"he expresses a particular thematic content, but at the same time this statement seems to indirectly convey to his mother the message:"Come close to me,don't leave me alone".

This property can be used to facilitate the communication of interpersonal messages that one is reluctant to express and own directly.

(4) Realification,identication and playfulness

These terms were introduced by Ariel(1984). "realification" designates the fact that in make-believe play an entity or event that exists in the player's mind is pretended to be actua ly present in the real external play environment at playtime.For example,J' eph pretends that he meets a real horse. "Identication" refers to the fact that some entity in the

immediate play environment(a toy, a sound, a gesture produced by the player himself, etc.) is pretended not to be itself but the very "relalified" element(e.g. Ada"becomes" a horse).

The realified element is the signified,and the identicated element the signifier(see Piaget 1962). "playfulness" stands for the fact that the claims of realification and identication are not made seriously. The player does not really believe in them.He pretends, just for the fun of it.

These principles can have manifold uses in family play therapy. Here are some of them:

1. Materialization: "Possible worlds" that are incompatible with the present reality of the family can be realified.The family members' wishes, plans, potential states, unreal possibilities,etc. can be temporarily materialized. For example, the horse scene in Ada and her children's play materializes a new form of relationships and therefore enables the participants to experience its advantages.Materialization enables the family members to experience new, less dysfunctional,transactional patterns.

2. Owning and alienation: If family members identicate themselves with a realified element(e.g. pretend that they have been expelled by their parents) the playfulness of the game enables them to both own the realified content(the signified) and be alienated from it at the same time.Joseph and his sister can accuse their mother and express their fear, but at the same time pretend that it is not their own mother they accuse or their own own fear that they express.

3.Separation of levels:Every make-believe play exists at the same time on the level of pretend, in which the claims of realification, identication and playfulness are made,and on the level of reality.Thus, when the prince and the princess meet the horse,Joseph and his sister also necessarily

meet their mother. This duality constitutes a very powerful vehicle for change.For instance,when a covertly rejecting mother asked to pretend that she was a loving mother she directly experienced her ambivalence , the outward manifestations of love on the level of make-believe and the rejection on the level of reality.This direct experience forced her later to do something with this intolerable discrepancy.

4.Arbitrariness of signifier: An example of a therapeutic use of this proper was given above(the lap identicated with "boarding school").

Epilogue

Having become "an expert" in family play therapy, my initial fascination with this medium not only failed to subside,but has also increased considerably,along with my enthusiasm.Again and again I am amazed with the intricacies of family make-believe play and find the unquestionable effectiveness of this form of therapy unbelievable.

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